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ABSTRACT

The structure and effectiveness of the National Diffusion Network (NDN) as a national system, and the characteristics of the diffusion and adoption processes for the dissemination of exemplary educational practices were evaluated by the Stanford Research Institute. Evaluation methods included a review of pertinent documents, the administration of questionnaires to NDN participants, direct observation, interviews, and site visits. The results indicated that: (1) NDN activities resulted in 2,000 project adoptions over a two-year period; most retained the major features of the original projects. (2) The demand for NDN services from interested school districts was greater than could be supplied. (3) The adopted projects provided substantial improvement over previous practices, and more effective utilization of existing resources. (4) Resource materials played an important role in supplying operational and instructional detail to implementing districts. (5) Personal assistance prior to project adoption, was critical to the success of project implementation and subsequent project adoptions. (6) Little dissemination of an exemplary project occurred unless the project developer was funded for dissemination. (7) In states where no facilitator was funded, little or no dissemination of exemplary projects occurred. (Author/MV)

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EVALUATION STUDY
Executive Summary

U.S. Department of
Health, Education, and Welfare
Office of Education
Office of Planning, Budgeting
and Evaluation

EVALUATION OF THE

NATIONAL DIFFUSION NETWORK

OCTOBER 1977

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL DIFFUSION NETWORK

Background

To promote the identification of successful educational practices and encourage the spread of these practices to schools across the nation, the U.S. Office of Education (OE) established the National Diffusion Network (NDN). Created in 1974 under Title III, Section 306 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (as amended), the NDN is designed to bring together representatives of federal, state and local agencies in order to promote the transfer of successful educational approaches to new school sites both within and across state lines. Through the NDN, projects that have been identified as successful and validated by the OE/NIE Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP) are made available to school districts interested in implementing these projects in their schools.

The NDN differs in several ways from other approaches to educational dissemination and change. First, the goal of the NDN is to effect the widespread adoption and implementation of innovations validated by the JDRP, as opposed to simply disseminating descriptive information regarding projects and practices.

Second, the NDN uses two types of change agents in accomplishing this goal. The first type the -- Developer -- is a change agent who operates a JDRP-approved project as a demonstration and who provides materials, training and assistance to school districts interested in adopting that project. A Developer may be a single individual or a staff of several persons. The Facilitator, in contrast, is the change agent who works within a specific region, usually an entire state. Facilitators provide a link between Developers and local schools. They identify potential adopters, establish communication between Developers and potential adopters, and assist in the adoption process.

Methodology

In order to assess the effectiveness of this approach to the dissemination of exemplary educational practices, OE contracted in June 1975 with Stanford Research Institute to conduct a national evaluation of the NDN organization, processes, and adoption characteristics. The evaluation focused on several major issues, including the structure and effectiveness of the NDN as a "national system", and the characteristics of the diffusion and adoption processes.

The study consisted of a review of pertinent documents, the administration of questionnaires to NDN participants, direct observations, interviews, and site visit case studies. The document review included the examination of all Developer and Facilitator grant applications and OE project files, and a review of relevant literature. A mail questionnaire was sent early in the fall of 1975 to all Developers (55), Facilitators (77), and adopter school districts (1,307) that participated in NDN activities the year before. In the spring of 1975, a more extensive survey was administered to those Developers (68), Facilitators (77), and adopters (1,460) participating in 1975-76. Teachers (234), principals (39), and district administrators (26) in districts included in the case-study sample received questionnnaires. Major NDN events, such as national and regional conferences, were observed in addition to local training and other conferences typically conducted by NDN Facilitators and Developers. Finally, the study also included visits to and interviews with NDN's technical assistance unit, and site visits, observations, and interviews at 16 Facilitator projects, 16 Developer projects, and 34 adopter school districts.

In addition to spreading information and creating awareness of exemplary educational approaches, the NDN also promotes the actual adoption and implementation of such approaches in school systems. Therefore, an important measure of success is the NDN's ability to bring about such implementations in schools. Accordingly, the evaluation identified and described the characteristics of the adoptions brought about by the NDN, and sought to understand the diffusion/adoption process employed and its effective elements, strategies, and tactics.

Findings and Conclusions

An important part of the evaluation consisted of obtaining, through field observation and interviews, a description of the processes actually employed by Network personnel in the dissemination of exemplary projects. The following paragraphs summarize the study's findings regarding the important characteristics of the diffusion/adoption process, the nature of project adoptions, and the characteristics of successful project implementation.

a. Nature of the NDN Project Diffusion/Adoption Process

The diffusion/adoption process employed by the NDN occurred in two main stages. The initiation stage included activities intended to inform school districts of the innovations available for adoption, build local interest in the adoption of one or more projects, and prepare district personnel to begin actual use of the projects. The implementation stage included the provision of training and other assistance once a decision has been made to adopt a specific project. The evaluation included both an indepth descriptive analysis of each stage of the diffusion/adoption process and

an examination of the effectivensss of various activities occuring within each stage. Initiation activities occurred within three substages: initial awareness, secondary awareness, and training. In line with their role as linkage agent between school districts and the exemplary projects in the NDN, Facilitators assumed major responsibility for conducting the initial awareness or outreach campaigns. Typically this consisted of mailing out materials that provide a brief overview of projects and services available to districts. The effectiveness of the NDN initial awareness campaigns in arousing school interest was quite high as indicated by the districts receiving awareness materials that sought more information. Requests were responded to both by providing further specific information and materials and by conducting demonstration activities (conferences, workshops, and visits to demonstration sites) to more fully describe the NDN innovations of interest.

Secondary awareness activities involved coordinated efforts of both Developers and Facilitators, but the Developers were the major information source. Secondary awareness activities tended to be more personalized and often involved visits by NDN staff to local schools. It was during the secondary awareness substage that most LEAs made at least a tentative decision to adopt a specific project. The consequences of successful awareness activities were adoption commitments from interested districts. At this time, arrangements were made to provide materials and training assistance to prepare the staff for implementing the innovation. Training varied in intensity and duration, depending on innovation features, adopter conditions, and Developer preferences. Training or pre-implementation assistance was the Developer's primary responsibility. The emphasis in this pre-implementation training was on the goals and philosophy of the innovation, followed by materials and procedures, problem areas, and evaluation methods.

The study found that the provision of personal assistance during the awareness stage was critical to the success of the subsequent adoption. Moreover, the study concluded that the personal assistance provided during the secondary awareness substage represents one of the more distinctive and generally effective features of the NDN's diffusion approach. Developers who relied on materials (as opposed to personal assistance) during this substage generally had poor adoption consequences such as greater implementation problems, decreased adopter satisfaction with the assistance provided by the Network, and less change in the adopting schools.

The second major stage in the NDN diffusion process began when local adopters actually started to implement their adopted innovation. At this time, individually tailored assistance, such as additional training or reassurance, was provided primarily by the Developer staff, but often with Facilitator support or assistance. Materials played a crucial role in the implementation process. The study found that the more successful implementations were for those innovations for which fairly completed and comprehensive materials

packages were provided. These materials packages consist of both management and curriculum components.

Although the majority of NDN activities and events occurred during the initiation stage, the effects and effectiveness of the NDN approach became evident at the implementation stage.

b. Nature of NDN Project Adoptions

The study findings indicate that the activities of the NDN resulted in approximately 2,000 project adoptions over a two-year period. Although the number of adoptions varied considerably among the projects available, the adoption patterns were reasonably consistent and indicated substantial intrastate as well as interstate spread. The majority of adoptions were located in rural or suburban schools and were implemented with a high degree of fidelity to the project's major components or key elements as defined by the Developer.

The projects adopted were often implemented at a moderate level, i.e., in a few classrooms in a single school or in a few schools--so as not to disrupt the schools involved. This generally moderate level of implementation facilitates project management at the local level and provision of follow-up assistance from NDN staff. Many districts reported plans to expand projects to additional classrooms and schools once they have become well established in the first groups of implementation classrooms.

Adoptions were concentrated at the preschool and elementary grade levels. This pattern appears due to characteristics of the innovations and to organizational features of the adopting units; i.e., a majority of the JDRP-approved subjects serve pupils in preschool and/or the elementary grades at the Developer sites. Furthermore, the organizational structure of elementary schools is less complex than that of secondary schools, which makes local coordination and management, and provision of NDN assistance simpler at the elementary level.

c. Characteristics of Successful Project Implementation

Successfully implemented projects had strong local leaders and administrative support. The local leader secured informed consent from administrators, located and coordinated the activities of the instructional staff who carried out project implementation, and was often involved in both administrative and instructional activities in the district.

Most adoptions involved some modification of methods and materials in order to adapt the innovation to local conditions. Project Developers generally regarded some local modification as inevitable and perhaps appropriate; however, they were concerned that local modifications retain the core features and guiding principles of the adopted project. This concern was apparently taken seriously by project adopters in that only one in five made major changes in the original project.

The implementation process was gradual and cumulative. Strong adoptions generally involved a systematic phase-in strategy and a relistic estimate of the time required for full-scale implementation--usually two years. In the first year, most adoptions involved a small number of district personnel and often only a few components of the projects were implemented, with expansion to include additional components and new staff in the second year.

Most districts viewed the project they adopted as one that satisfied a major need of the school, provided substantial improvement over previous practices, and produced more effective utilization of existing resources. This high degree of adopter satisfaction may be due in part to the fact that districts tended to adopt projects that were in agreement with their current educational philosophy and were not radical departures from the school system's existing operation. Because the projects adopted did not usually represent radical changes, the amount of additional resources required (and thus the cost involved in adopting and implementing projects via the NDN) was kept at a minimum.

The study found little project dissemination activity in states without funded Facilities and little dissemination of projects that were not funded for national diffusion. Further, the study concluded that states are unlikely, except under special circumstances, to engage in diffusion/adoption activites across state lines. Since State Education Agencies are under scrutiny by their constituents for expenditures, it is difficult for them to spend funds for exporting projects to other states or to spend state or local funds for out-of-state travel to import projects. The study concluded that the the national or interstate functions performed by the NDN would not likely be carried out in the absence of federal funding.

In summary, the study found that:

1. NDN activities resulted in 2,000 project adoptions over a two-year period; most with a high degree of fidelity to the major features of the original projects.

2. Demand for NDN services from interested school districts was greater than could be supplied.

3. Project adopters reported that the adopted projects provided substantial improvement over old practices and more effectively utilized existing resources.

4. Materials played an important role in supplying operational and instructional deail to implementing districts.

5. Provision of personal assistance prior to project adoption, was critical to the success of subsequent project adoptions and also necessary for transferring project spirt and rational, and for providing reassurance and assistance during implementation.

6. Little dissemination of an exemplary project occurred unless the project Developer was funded for dissemination.

7. In States for which no Facilitator was funded, little or no dissemination of exemplary projects occurred.